



**King County**

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## DISABILITY LANGUAGE AND ETIQUETTE

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### LANGUAGE

Language is continually evolving, and that includes language related to people with disabilities. Staying current is important, not to show that you are “politically correct” but to communicate effectively and with respect. What you say and write may enhance the dignity of people with disabilities or inadvertently reflect stereotypes and negative attitudes.

Some words and phrases don’t recognize the broad range of capabilities of people with disabilities. People with disabilities don’t need or want to be pitied, nor should they be deemed “courageous” or “special” as they accomplish daily activities or work. Also, people are sometimes concerned that they will say the wrong thing, so they say nothing at all—thus further segregating people with disabilities.

**“Person First”** Generally, refer to the person first, not the disability. For example, “the person who uses a wheelchair” or “the person who has arthritis” is preferred over “the wheelchair person” or “the arthritic.” This last term especially defines the disability as the person rather than as one aspect of his/her life. This general rule may be different within some communities, such as those who are blind or Deaf. Individuals in these groups often self-identify as “blind person” or “Deaf person.” Also, mention a disability only when it is relevant to the discussion.

“Handicap” and “disability” are not synonyms! Disability is a generic term for a condition which may affect a person’s mobility, hearing, vision, speech, or cognitive function (paraplegia, deafness, AIDS). Handicap describes a barrier that is environmental or attitudinal (no ramps or elevator, information not available in Braille, negative stereotypes).

### ETIQUETTE

If you’ve never directly interacted with someone with a disability, it is not unusual to feel uncertain about what to do. Here are a few tips.

**Shaking hands** is usually welcome. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting. You may want to take the cue from the individual with a disability. (If someone is blind, she won’t see your extended hand; wait to see if she extends hers.)

**When talking with a person who has a disability**, look at and speak directly to that person rather than to a companion, aide, or sign language interpreter.

**Common words and phrases** are OK to use. For example, it’s fine to say “see you later” to a blind person, or “Do you want to go for a walk?” to someone who uses a wheelchair.

**WHEN REFERRING TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES,  
CHOOSE WORDS THAT REFLECT DIGNITY AND RESPECT, SUCH AS:**

<b>INAPPROPRIATE LANGUAGE</b>	<b>APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE</b>
the disabled, the blind, the deaf	people with disabilities, the disability community ("disabled" is an adjective and therefore must be accompanied by a noun), the blind community, the Deaf community
crippled, suffers from, afflicted with, stricken with, victim of, invalid	has a disability, is a person with a disability, physically disabled, walks with a cane, uses leg braces
normal person, healthy, whole	non-disabled, person without disabilities, able-bodied
impaired, impairment	disabled, has a disability
hearing impaired, hearing impairment	deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened
visually impaired, visual impairment	low vision, blind
wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair person	wheelchair user, person who uses a wheelchair
handicap parking, disabled parking	accessible parking, disability parking
dumb, mute	person who is unable to speak, has difficulty speaking, uses synthetic speech, is non-vocal, non-verbal
stutterer, tongue-tied	person who has a speech or communication disability
CP victim, spastic	person with cerebral palsy
epileptic	person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder
fit, attack	seizure, epileptic episode or event
crazy, lunatic, insane, nuts, deranged, psycho	people with emotional disorders, mental illness, mental disability, psychiatric disability
retard, mentally defective, moron, idiot, imbecile, Down's person, mongoloid	person with an intellectual, cognitive, or developmental disability
slow learner, retarded	has a learning disability, person with specific learning disability
dwarf, midget	person of small stature, short stature; little person
paraplegic, quadriplegic	man with paraplegia, woman who is paralyzed, person with spinal cord injury
birth defect	congenital disability, disabled from birth
post-polio, suffered from polio	person who had polio
homebound	stay-at-home, hard for the person to get out